THE PRESS WAR OF 1981

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For media watchers in Scotland, 1981 wi own as the year that the Lonrho-backed Sunday Standard droppe a depth charge into the normally placid waters of the Scotti ss. The launch of the Standard,at a time when the Scottish econ s rocky, was a bold and aggressive piece of marketing by the publ George Outram (who also publish the Glasgow Herald and the g Times) and had the effect of knocking out The Scotsman's pla start their own Sunday paper, and at the same time put a cutt ge on the old rivalry between the Glasgow Herald group, and t nburgh duo The Scotsman and the Evening News.

And, as things developed, that rivalry b anything but friendly. It led to a serious haemorrhage of talent f Edinburgh (and into Glasgow), the first strike in the history Scotsman, and ended with traditionally non-militant journalist uncing their management as incompetents, whose ham-fisted and -pinching policies were '....threatening to end more than 150 ye authoritative and responsible journalism.' In the view of one S n journalist, "It's been a hell of a year so far. We've got ourse ome more money, and everything looks normal on the surface. B e got a feeling we might have paid a pretty high price for the c

The catalyst for the brief, but heated, crisis of 1981 was the advent of the Sunday Standard, subtitled uality of Scotland' and launched on the back of an expensive adve g campaign on April 26th 1981. In fact, before George Outram made move, various of Scotland's newspaper brass had been toying wi idea of trying to exploit the apparent gap at the quality end o Scottish market with a quality Scottish Sunday paper. While t er reaches of the Sunday market in Scotland are astonishingly w ovided for (by the

Ironically perhaps, Wilson expected his targeted 175,000 circulation to come, not from the Sunday Times, Observer, and Sunday Telegraph, but from the Sunday Mail, Sunday Post and above all the Scottish Sunday Express (which is printed in Manchester, and whose Scottish prefix Wilson describes as "almost an offence under the Trades Descriptions Act). But Wilson admitted frankly that the end of April was not the most propitious time to launch a paper ("with the summer hiatus coming up") and that he would have preferred the autumn. "But we brought our plans forward to do in The Scotsman's project" he said. "We're going to have to relaunch the paper in the autumn".

In the early months of 1981 Charlie Wilson ran a feverish - but highly successful - headhunting campaign. In an amazing succession of discreet inquiries, confidential meetings, off-the-record discussions and quiet chats in pubs, Wilson managed to round up the people he needed in the short time available. According to some of the recruits the conjunction of Wilson's enthusiasm,and the promise of higher than average wages, proved near irresistable. And the quality of the people Wilson secured was impressive. John Bell moved from The Sunday Times to be the Standard's London-based city editor, Ray Perman gave up the Scottish end of the Financial Times to run its business pages and after a dispute with the management of the Sunday Mail, its editor Clive Sandground left to become features editor of the Standard. Ian Archer the star sports writer of the Scottish Daily Express also jumped ship (although the Express went to court to stop the Standard using Archer's name in their prelaunch publicity) as did their music critic, Neville Garden. Jim Hunter, one of the Press and Journal's most intelligent feature writers signed on to cover the north of Scotland, while the Labour Party's former Scottish research officer Alf Young quit Radio Clyde to cover industrial affairs and from the B.B.C. Wilson recruited two experienced reporter/sleuths in David Scott and George Hume.

While there were rumbles from all over Scotland at Wilson's head-hunting raids, nobody suffered more than The Scotsman. In the course of a few months the Edinburgh paper lost its rugby writer, Norman Mair (who was 'pure box office' according to Arnold Kemp) their political editor Tom James, their Dundee correspondent Brian MacCartney, their features editor Harry Reid (who is now the Standard's sports editor) plus reporters Sally Magnusson, and Angus MacLeod. It was a grevious outflow of talent and editorial

nous which was compounded when The Scotsman's deputy editor Arnold Kemp was given the job of editor of the Glasgow Herald, and took with him the columnist Jack MacLean (who The Scotsman had discovered and built up as their 'Urban Voltaire') and later The Scotsman's feature-star Julie Davidson to fill the slot of TV writer.

All of which alarmed and depressed the journalists at Scotsman Publications Ltd (SPL) in Edinburgh. In March 1981 The Scotsman and Evening News 'chapels' (i.e. office branches) of the National Union of Journalists told their management that unless they could offer wages something like those paid in Glasgow, then the stampede would continue, and the Edinburgh papers would be unable to replace those lost with experienced hands. While the basic wage at the Glasgow Herald was around £11,500 a year (and at the Standard even higher) journalists at The Scotsman and Evening News were languishing at £8,000. The management pointed out that the Edinburgh journalists were being paid more than their counterparts on the English provincial papers also owned by the International Thomson Organisation, and said that 11% was their final offer. Not good enough, said the NUJ negotiators. There was no more in the kitty, said Thomsons.

Furious at the intransigence of their management, the journalists at The Scotsman (in Edinburgh, Glasgow and London) passed a resolution expressing 'no confidence' in their own management, and issued an astonishing public statement. Having '....already proved their inability to manage Times Newspapers Ltd' the journalists said, the International Thomson Organisation, through their Edinburgh management were now '....threatening to end more than 150 years of authoritative and responsible Scottish journalism'. If the Scottish public knew of the ineptitude of The Scotsman management, the journalists announced, they would "be equally alarmed by the irreparable damage threatening both titles..."

The statement (which was issued to the press and to all Scottish MPs) went on to claim that The Scotsman's problems began with the installation of the new technology, an investment which had 'backfired badly'. According to the journalists, 'Shame and anger are the only words that can sum up the feelings of SPL journalists towards the so-called new technology which has seen a rapid and seemingly unending deterioration in standards. Advertising takes precedence over editorial, the papers are awash with misprints, thousands of our readers

huge-selling Sunday Post and Sunday Mail, in addition to the London popular Sundays) there was nothing up-market to grace the newstands, other than the Sunday Times, Observer, and Sunday Telegraph.

And there has been a strong feeling for a number of years that the London-produced Sunday qualities either cannot or will not cover Scottish affairs and Scottish sport in any depth. Certainly there is some justice in the complaint; only the Sunday Times keeps a (very modest) editorial presence in Scotland. The Observer relies on the services of Kerry Gill, the Glasgow news editor of The Scotsman, while the Sunday Telegraph use 'visiting firemen' (and in particular the excellent Paul Potts). There is also a feeling that the London papers tend to deal in stereotypes when it comes to Scotland, favouring picturesque stories about crofters, highland lairds, remote islands and castles, rather than coming to grips with the issues which bedevil Scotland.

"In fact, I don't think the London papers deserve the circulation they do have in Scotland" says one circulation executive. "The Sunday Times sells around 120,000 copies a week, the Observer does about 80,000, and the Sunday Telegraph picks up another 20,000 or so. Now that's a proven market of about 230,000 per week, which is quite big, and there is some evidence that a fair slice of the Sunday Mail's circulation is made up of people who buy the paper by default. Not because they want a popular paper, but because the Mail is the only Scottish Sunday that covers Scottish sport in any depth, or has a go at important stories with a bit of aggression. So that might be available to a quality paper".

But while the sales equation certainly looked promising enough, the circulation executives could not duck some awkward questions. Could a sufficient proportion of the 200,000 or so Scots who buy the London qualities be weaned away to a Scottish quality? If not, how many could be persuaded to buy a Scottish quality as well as the Sunday Times, Observer, and Sunday Telegraph? How many could be coaxed away from the army (760,000 strong) of Sunday Mail buyers? Were there enough up-market readers in their ranks to make a difference? And what inroads could be made into the fast-dwindling circulation of the Scottish Sunday Express? Where were all their readers going?

The only way to find out was to test the market, and ironically it was Scotsman Publications Ltd which made the first move. Towards

the end of 1980, Arnold Kemp, then The Scotsman's deputy editor, was asked to put together a 'dummy' newspaper, partly to explore the editorial possibilities and problems, and also to give The Scotsman's marketing men a tool for discreetly testing the market. Kemp's dummy was a promising affair. With a working title of 'The Sunday Citizen' it was a well laid-out broadsheet, with good typography, and a quality feel to it (although there were a few mutterings at North Bridge that it was 'lightweight').

But Kemp's Sunday Citizen never got off the ground. Startled by the prospect of the Scottish quality market being cornered by the men from Edinburgh, George Outram & Co, with the backing of Tiny Rowland's Lonrho, moved to pre-empt The Scotsman. They rushed forward their own plans, and in January 1981 announced that they intended to publish a Scottish quality Sunday in the spring, providing they could do the necessary deals with the 30-odd 'chapels' who would man the operation at Albion Street in Glasgow. The Scotsman management, who were less convinced that a market existed for a Scottish quality Sunday, quietly dropped their plans. "Maybe there is room on the stalls for one Scottish Sunday", one of them said "but certainly not for two".

The man given the hair-raising job of launching a brand-new quality newspaper in the space of 60 or so days was Charlie Wilson, the 45-year old editor of the Glasgow Evening Times. Wilson, who is a man of abrasive enthusiasm, had worked a sharp improvement in the fortunes of the Evening Times; at the end of 1977 the paper's circulation was around 186,000 per day; by the end of 1980 it was over 211,000. Characteristically, Wilson was enthusiastic about the new Sunday's prospects, if only because Fleet Street's cumbersome technology, and traditional apathy about Scotland, made the service of the London papers so poor. "Take the Brixton riots" Wilson said (two days before the Sunday Standard was launched) "maybe one of the most important sociological events in Britain since the War. But not one word appeared about them in any of the English Sundays that appeared in Scotland. Why? Because the first bricks were thrown about half past four, and before the news got to the newspapers, all the early editions had gone". A Scottish Sunday, on the other hand, with four or five editions of its own could take 'late-breaking' stories at least till midnight.

are daily denied papers as editions are delayed and lost by "system crashes" and other new technology problems. After pointing out that Scotsman Publications Ltd were '...arguably the most profitable national newspaper publishing house in Scotland, and certainly the most cost efficient...' the journalists regretted the need to drag their dirty washing into the public gaze, but vowed to '...pursue by all means - both political and industrial - to force a reversal of these policies.'

And they were as good as their word. On Wednesday the 15th April the journalists voted by a sizeable majority to take strike action, and at midnight on Saturday the 18th (the week before the Sunday Standard was due to be launched) the journalists on The Scotsman and the Evening News walked out, to start the first strike in the The Scotsman 165 year history. The journalists were in a bitter and angry mood, and the atmosphere was not improved by the management's decision to produce The Scotsman as a property-advertising 'give-away', an action which the journalists denounced as 'the cynical and degrading prostitution of a great newspaper'. Worse still were the efforts of the editor of the Evening News, Ian Nimmo, to get the paper out with the help of non-striking executives and his readers who he invited to sent in '....all your local news items, pictures, stories, weddings, golden weddings, presentations, club news, local sports results etc.....'

Nimmo's response to the strike inspired some harsh words from Arnold Kemp, the new editor of the Glasgow Herald, after Nimmo lifted, more or less intact, a story from the sports pages of the Glasgow Herald. "If Ian Nimmo decides to turn out a paper without his journalists that's his own business", Kemp said "but when he lifts material from the Glasgow Herald, that's another matter, and I strongly object to it". In fact, Kemp was thoroughly disgusted by the way The Scotsman Thomson management had handled the dispute and the challenge from the Glasgow newspapers. "After my years on The Scotsman" Kemp says "I have come to the conclusion the International Thomson Organisation is not worthy of the responsibility of the ownership of The Scotsman".

The combination of the bad publicity, the strike itself, and the fierce competition from the West, put a formidable pressure on the Scotsman/Thomson management. After a day's hard bargaining on Thursday the 30th April the management buckled, and improved their offer to the journalists. On Friday the 1st May the NUJ negotiators recommended

that their chapels accept the new deal, and the strike was over. The deal which the journalists extracted from their management was a complex one, but in essence it meant that over a 15-month period the basic wage for journalists at Scotsman Publications Ltd would be cranked up from just over £8,000 a year to around £11,500, still below the wage levels in Glasgow, but not quite so far behind. It was something of a famous victory for the NUJ, and the chapel 'fathers' were pleased by the way the Edinburgh journalists (to whom a strike was a novelty) handled themselves, and put their case to the public on the picket lines. But there is also a feeling that the two-week strike, and the angry words that were said, have soured the atmosphere in the offices of The Scotsman and the Evening News. "There's still something in the air" one journalist says "everything looks normal enough, but there's a strain in the place. People have memories".

Meanwhile, Charlie Wilson's Sunday Standard made its debut on April 26th into a newspaper-buying market which was, initially at least, both receptive and highly curious. That first heady Sunday, the Sunday Standard sold more than 400,000 copies, well above the management's expectations, and despite Charlie Wilson's feeling that "We're going to look back on our first issues and wince. It's a bit of a miracle we got a paper together at all, given the time we had". And, in fact, the Sunday Standard was a very creditable effort; a combination of well-researched stories, brief (maybe too brief) feature material, a well-thought out editorial spread on the centre pages and excellent coverage of Scottish sport (which it has sustained). Allan Massie's television column (a crucial slot) started well, and has continued to be high-grade stuff, while the book, film and theatre reviews have been lively, and often perceptive.

Not that the paper was without its critics. There were complaints that the art direction and the layout was not firm enough, that the picture editing was feeble, and that the typography was too similar to that of the Glasgow Herald. Some of the professional critics also complained that the quality of the cartooning fell short, and that the 'Oor Geordie' strip (George Younger, the Secretary of State for Scotland in the guise of D.C. Thomson's legendary Oor Wullie) was a bit obvious, while Ian White's centre-page political cartoons lacked the vigour of the Glasgow Herald's Turnbull, or the oblique waspishness of The Scotsman's Bob Dewar.

But, by and large, the Sunday Standard was thought to be a very decent effort, which deserved to secure a foothold in the Scottish market. However, problems soon began to emerge; as the management knew, the spring and summer of 1981 was not the best of times to launch a newspaper, and sales quickly began to drop from the first days of 400,000 or so (to the relief of the Sunday Times, Observer and Sunday Telegraph). By the beginning of August, the Standard's circulation was hovering in the region of 130,000 to 140,000, which was well below Wilson's target figure of 175,000, but probably above the break-even figure (which is thought to be around 120,000).

In fact, Charlie Wilson and the George Outram management are much more concerned about the way in which advertisers are keeping a tight grip on their wallets. The advertising market is in the doldrums and the press (both Scottish and U.K.) is feeling the pinch. And unless a newspaper is collecting advertising money, every copy is running at a loss; and if every copy loses money, the more copies the management sells, the more money they lose. "So it's Catch 22 for the Standard" explains one circulation expert."If they suddenly start putting on circulation, they start piling up the losses. But unless they get the circulation, they're not going to get the advertising when the market picks up. If the market picks up. I wish the Standard well, but it must be touch and go". As yet there are no victors in the press war of 1981.